Paul Kurtz

Toward A New Enlightenment

THE PHILOSOPHY OF PAUL KURTZ

Edited with an introduction by

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Bigfoot on the Loose; or, How to Create a Legend

Bigfoot enthusiasts were given a big boost recently by the news, proclaimed nationwide, that the physical remains of a Bigfoot had finally been discovered. The media displayed photographs of the head and hair samples of the creature—also called Sasquatch, Yeti, or the Abominable Snowman in various parts of the world—and there were also reports of "eyewitness accounts" of his appearance.

What was heralded as the "Bigfoot find" of the century was made in Lewiston, New York, near the Canadian border, not far from the infamous Love Canal in Niagara Falls, home of the Hooker Chemical Company dump. I had been reading about this latest Bigfoot case in the Western New York newspapers and hearing about it on radio and TV but remained dubious and rather amused until I received a phone call on March 11 from Jon Beckjord, who announced that he was in the area and wanted the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) to see first-hand the startling new evidence that he had uncovered. This, he said, should satisfy Bigfoot skeptics.

Beckjord, a free-lance photographer, former TV cameraman, and "amateur anthropologist," is head of "Project Bigfoot" (formerly "Project Grendel"), a Seattle-based organization devoted to publicizing the existence of the elusive creature. CSICOP had had continuing dialogue with Beckjord for several months prior to his call. He had been claiming definitive evidence for Bigfoot and had requested us to appoint a special blue-ribbon subcommittee to pursue the inquiry. Last year members of CSICOP had received several letters from Beckjord. I asked him to send us the best photographic evidence he had of Bigfoot and told him that if there was even the slightest bit of evidence we would be glad to look into the matter further. Our position was that the existence of such an animal was within the realm of possibility but had not yet been confirmed by hard evidence.

Beckjord sent us a number of photographs taken by him in the Sierra Nevada. Bigfoot, Big Mama, and Little Bruno allegedly appeared in the pictures in a

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clump of trees in the background. The 30 students in my Philosophy of the Paranormal and Parapsychology class at the State University of New York at Buffalo pored over the photographs and listened to tapes by Beckjord describing his "evidence." Not one could see anything in the photographs that remotely resembled what Beckjord claimed to see—they saw only fuzzy clumps of leaves. Indeed, almost any part of the photographs could be singled out and creatures read into them—like the interpretations of Rorschach ink-blots. Beckjord had sent similar samples to *Skeptical Inquirer* editor Kendrick Frazier and to Professor William Bainbridge, a scientific consultant of CSICOP from the Seattle area. The same photos were also examined by the CSICOP Executive Council last December. All drew a similar negative conclusion. I told Beckjord that what he had sent us did not present a shred of prima facie evidence. In our view, Beckjord saw in the photographs what he wanted to see.

Hence his telephone call. He claimed that at long last he had something solid. I was doubtful, for what I had seen in the papers and on the television news looked again like the product of a fanciful imagination. Nevertheless, we decided to conduct an investigation in Lewiston the next day. With me were two scientific consultants of CSICOP, professors Charles Cazeau (geologist) and Stuart D. Scott, Jr. (anthropologist), from the State University of New York at Buffalo. Both were authors of the new book *Exploring the Unknown* and had done research on Bigfoot.

Beckjord helped us to bring together some of the principals in the case: the hunters who stumbled upon the remains of "Bigfoot," three members of the County Sheriff's Department who had intensively investigated the case, including reports of alleged "sightings" by people in the area, interested members of the Lewiston police and fire departments, and actual "eyewitnesses" of Bigfoot. We all met at Moradian's Cafe and then moved to the town hall, where we continued our inquiry for the better part of five hours.

The "facts" as presented were that two young hunters had come across the carcass of an animal near Lutts Road in September 1978. Its body was badly decomposed and had been apparently eaten by scavengers. They were intrigued by its grimace—its teeth were protruding. They cut off the head and paws and brought them to the Lewiston Fire Department. Someone asked if it might be Bigfoot—having seen the so-called documentary "In Search of Bigfoot" on TV. Those on duty had said that it was a bear; the head was photographed and left outside, and then apparently taken away by dogs or raccoons. The carcass was taken in a bushel basket to the Buffalo Museum of Science by the Conservation Department. Arthur Clark, assistant curator, and James Dorr, chief preparator (taxidermist), examined the macerated remains. Dorr, who had dealt with hundreds of bears, said it was undoubtedly a black bear, and Clark concurred. Evidently it had been hunted and killed in Canada, butchered and dressed, and

then dumped near Lewiston. Clark indicated that several similar specimens have turned up in various dumps in the area over the years.

The incident had been forgotten until the Spring of 1980 when a teenage boy from Lewiston heard Beckjord on a radio interview, from Montreal, saying that if anyone had any evidence of Bigfoot to phone him on the "Bigfoot Hot Line." The young lad did, telling him about the find, and relating that he had himself seen Bigfoot. Beckjord immediately contacted the news media in Western New York—and the news began to leak out nationwide. Beckjord himself later appeared on the scene to confirm the find.

Beckjord, a tall, heavy-set man, has devoted his life to proving that Bigfoot is real. He told us that Bigfoots have been seen in all 50 states (he recently investigated sightings in Florida) but that the Lewiston find was "the best on record." Here, he affirmed, was decisive evidence to settle the question. At the hearing, which I informally chaired, we interviewed the hunters, who told us what they found. One, apparently a novice, said that it did not look like a bear because of its "facial contortions." A fireman who photographed the head thought that it did. A part-time policeman, Peter Filicetti, who is writing a book on Bigfoot, was quoted in the press as saying that he did not know what it was, only to confound the "mystery."

Added to this were the rumors that there had been for some time many reports of Bigfoot sightings in the Lewiston area. Members of the Sheriff's Department, which is under the direction of William Tollhurst, said that they had attempted to track down every such call. They had *never* encountered the strange footprints or the reported droppings in the places depicted by the callers. One deputy reported that there had been a Tuscarora Indian legend of a creature in the area. He had spent many nights in the woods hoping to track it down but never encountered anything remotely resembling it. We questioned two so-called eyewitnesses, whose testimony turned out to be unreliable. Roger, the lad who had phoned Beckjord in Montreal, claimed he heard grunting noises in the woods, saw numerous tracks in the snow, and saw what he thought were the shoulders and head of a creature in the distance. When asked if anyone was with him to corroborate his account, he replied that on one occasion a friend of his was. Where was his friend? He had moved out of town and Roger did not have his address or telephone number! Since it had been dark, he could give few additional details of what he saw.

An elderly woman presented hearsay evidence about an experience of her daughter-in-law, who was not present at the hearing. Some time ago she had been cross-country skiing and had seen something crouching in the distance, but she thought it was a dog. Beckjord interjected at this point that it was undoubtedly Bigfoot.

Professor Scott pointed out that for Bigfoot to have existed for a period of time in the Lewiston area, a fairly well-populated area cut off on one side by a

river and on another by a lake, there would have had to be a breeding population of at least a few. But there have been no multiple sightings. Someone countered that perhaps there was only one creature, a mutant, caused by the Love Canal chemical dump!

Beckjord kept insisting that the creature uncovered by the hunters was not a bear—though he had never seen the remains, only a photograph of the head. Its incisor teeth were somewhat longer than a bear's, he said—the measurements made from the photograph dispute that. It had no ears, he claimed—they seem to have been chewed off by predators and the remains were badly decomposed. Its hair was different, he added—James Dorr said that it was definitely bear hair. The snout was not sufficiently elongated, he maintained—all of our observations indicated that it was. When we asked Beckjord why no bones or skeletal remains had ever been found of Bigfoot here or elsewhere, he speculated that Bigfoot was a "paranormal" phenomenon; perhaps the creatures came from UFOs and were using psychic means to block our detecting them.

As we were leaving the town hall, Beckjord brought out his movie projector and showed the Roger Patterson "Bigfoot" film that had been widely shown on TV. The film, hotly disputed, depicted Bigfoot looking more like a man dressed in a monkey suit than anything else. In any case, it had little to do with the Lewiston case. Scott, Cazeau, and I concluded that what had been uncovered was most likely a bear and nothing more than that, and the Sheriff's Department concurred.

The next day, Beckjord called Professor Scott in "red-faced embarrassment." It turns out that he had since interviewed the owner of the Lutts Road property where the remains were found. The owner reported that the land had been used as an informal dump: there were sofa cushions, an old freezer, and other garbage. Since late 1978 the owner had noticed a clear plastic garbage bag with a bear's carcass inside. This tends to confirm the conclusion that a bear had been hunted and its skinned carcass discarded on the dump. Indeed, Beckjord said that the few scraps of hair that he dug out of the ground might have come from other carcasses that had been discarded there as well. He said, "I have found that other hides have been dumped at the Lutts Road site in the past few years . . . Thus I regret (I really do) that the hairs may, or may not, have come from the beast. I cannot be sure, and I wish I could." Beckjord then admitted that the Museum of Science was probably correct in its view that it was a bear.

Beckjord left town and was on his way to New York City. We were just about ready to close the Lewiston Bigfoot case—until early on the morning of April 1, 1980, when Beckjord was featured on the ABC-TV network "Good Morning, America" program. There he was, as big as ever, showing "samples of the hair" that he dug up at the Lewiston site and photographs of the severed head and claiming that these were strong evidence of Bigfoot.

We were horrified at the spectacle and wrote to Elton Rule, president of ABC, complaining about the lack of balanced treatment and requesting that they present the public with the other side of the story. Equal time was denied. The reply received from the "talent coordinator," Catherine Vasapoli, who booked the program, stated: "I was very distressed to hear of your complaint that we misled the audience with false evidence, primarily because I booked Mr. Beckjord only as a human interest story." On April 29, the tabloid *Weekly World News* featured a "news exclusive" on their front page: "Bigfoot Photos Baffle Experts." Beckjord is quoted as saying, "We are very excited about the find. These photos could really turn science on its head if we can authenticate them."

And thus the story of the Lewiston "Bigfoot," like those of UFOs and other strange paranormal claims, seems to be well on its way to becoming an "established fact," indeed a legend. Defended by a dedicated believer, it has been taken up and sensationalized by some irresponsible members of the media. Although some newspapers in Western New York have briefly reported CSICOP's negative findings, until now the national media have not, and the public still has not had an opportunity to hear the full facts of the case.